

NEW JERSEY AVENUE
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-715

HABS
DC
WASH,
624-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NEW JERSEY AVENUE

HABS No. DC-715

HABS
DC
WASH,
624-

Location: In the northwest quadrant, this avenue extends from Constitution Avenue on the north side of the U.S. Capitol Grounds northwest to the historic city boundary at Florida Avenue near Fifth and S streets, NW. In the southeast quadrant it extends at the same angle southeast from Independence Avenue on the south side of the Capitol Grounds to M Street on the north side of the Navy Yard.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U.S. government while the paved roadways, sidewalks and the planted areas between are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works. Most of the reservations along the avenue are maintained by the National Park Service, but a few are managed by the District of Columbia.

Present Use: Minor thoroughfare serving mostly local traffic.

Significance: This avenue developed according to the L'Enfant/Ellicott plans of the city. It is interrupted by the Capitol Grounds, and most places on the avenue--in both the Northwest and Southeast quadrants--offer views of the U.S. Capitol dome.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.
2. Alterations and additions:
 - 1845: Congress requires grading and graveling of avenue from the capitol to the Eastern Branch.
 - 1853: The northern segment of the avenue paved from B (Constitution Avenue) to E streets, graded and graveled with curbstones and gutters, and a narrow footway paved from B to D streets.
 - 1856: Half the width of the avenue graded and graveled from D Street to New York Avenue.
 - 1903: Navy Yard expanded eliminating avenue south of M Street, SE.
 - 1908: Segment of avenue near Union Station widened.

B. Historical Context:

On his plan, Pierre L'Enfant's drew this avenue to extend from Boundary Street at an intersection with Rhode Island Avenue. From there, it continues southeast at 15 degrees to the Eastern Branch, or Anacostia River. Six blocks south of Boundary Street it crosses New York Avenue, and four blocks to the south of that, intersects with Massachusetts Avenue where it forms the eastern side of yellow-shaded Reservation No. 12. Seven blocks south of Massachusetts Avenue it intersects with the Capitol Grounds. Beginning again south of the Capitol, it

continues six blocks before reaching a large amorphous reservation (Garfield Park) marked with an "E," designating it as the site of a grand cascade. Six blocks south of the reservation, it runs into the one of the mouths of the canal planned to feed into the Eastern Branch. Andrew Ellicott maintained L'Enfant's basic design for the avenue in his city plan of 1792 but defined the intersection at New York Avenue as a circle.

As one of two avenues intersecting the Capitol Grounds, L'Enfant probably envisioned a corridor more impressive than today's New Jersey Avenue. Dotted lines on L'Enfant's plan indicate that the roadway was to continue northwest beyond the city boundary. It never developed beyond the boundary, however, and as a result, it has remained a relatively quiet thoroughfare. Furthermore, none of its intersections are marked by special treatment, although L'Enfant envisioned a reservation assigned to one of the states at Massachusetts Avenue, and Ellicott planned a circle at the New York Avenue intersection. Garfield Park, the only major park on the avenue besides the Capitol Grounds, was once proposed to be "one of the principal resorts of the city," but it is now a large but relatively minor park used for the most part only by nearby residents.

Despite its current status as a relatively ordinary thoroughfare, New Jersey Avenue did have a dramatic beginning, and its clear vista to the Capitol was vehemently protected by L'Enfant. While L'Enfant's work crew was clearing the path of the avenue south of the Capitol site in 1791, they encountered a partially constructed house with walls projecting 7' into the avenue's right-of-way. The house belonged to Daniel Carroll, a nephew of one of the largest landholders in the city, as well as one of the three commissioners in charge of the District of Columbia. Carroll refused to relocate the house, so L'Enfant, allowing nothing to violate his vision, ordered his men to raze the structure--just one of the impetuous acts that would eventually lead to his dismissal.

Carroll rebuilt his home, Duddington, in the large square bounded by New Jersey Avenue, E, F, and Second streets, SE. Built with bricks from Carroll's nearby brickyard, the house was among the most elegant in the early city. It was one of only two houses in Washington described as "comfortable" by Connecticut Representative John Cotton Smith in 1800.¹ Smith also described New Jersey Avenue: "Instead of recognizing the avenues and streets portrayed on the plan of the city, not one was visible, unless we except a road with two buildings on each side of it called the New Jersey Avenue. The Pennsylvania Avenue was then nearly the whole distance a deep morass, covered with alder bushes."²

Like Carroll, Thomas Law saw the segment of New Jersey Avenue connecting the Capitol Grounds with the canal and the Anacostia River as a good investment, and purchased much of it in 1796. He built a row of three elegant boardinghouses conforming to the slightly acute angle at the intersection of the avenue with C Street. He and his wife, Eliza Parke Washington, lived in the corner house where they entertained prominent guests including George Washington and foreign dignitaries. Farther south on the avenue at E Street, SE, Law erected federal townhouses known as the Ten Buildings, just north of Reservation No. 17 near Duddington. Law, an Englishman who made his fortune trading in India, attempted to develop Washington commerce by building a sugar refinery at the

¹ Eberlein and Hubbard, 390-93.

² Caemmerer, 41.

south end of New Jersey Avenue near the proposed canal.

Ultimately, Law lost money on his Washington investments because the city's southeast and southwest quadrants didn't develop as he had predicted. The refinery failed and Law's property along New Jersey Avenue remained a backwater at the time he died in 1834. His most successful investment was his residence at New Jersey Avenue and C Street, which he leased to innkeepers to house the transient congressional population. In fact, Thomas Jefferson lived there at the time he became president in 1801, and walked one block to the Capitol for his inauguration. He also lived in the house for two weeks as president while repairs were being made on the White House.³ In spite of its prominent visitors and inhabitants, the continuous construction on the Capitol often left the avenue strewn with large blocks of stone and debris. It was not until 1845 that Congress finally attempted to improve the avenue by requiring that it be graded and graveled from the Capitol to the Eastern Branch.⁴

With Carroll's and Law's investments, the southern segment developed sooner than the stretch north of the Capitol. Development was encouraged north of the Capitol, however, in 1852 when the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company constructed a passenger station on the northwest corner of New Jersey Avenue and C Street. Soon after, Congress allocated \$49,000 for the improvement of the avenue north of the Capitol, and by 1853 it was graded and graveled with curbstones and gutters from B to E streets, NW. The narrow paved footway flanking the route from B to D Streets was described as "very handsome as well as useful." The commissioners of Public Buildings expressed their desire for continued improvements, writing in 1856: "New Jersey Avenue north of the Capitol has been fully graded and graveled to D Street and from that point to New York Avenue it has been only graded and graveled one-half its width. It certainly was not intended to be left in its present unfinished state, and especially as it is almost as much used as any other avenue or street in the city."⁵

Despite these requests for road improvements, few buildings appear to face onto the avenue, according to the 1857-61 Boschke map. This lack of buildings was probably due in part to the fact that the avenue crossed over very uneven terrain north of the Capitol. In contrast, the avenue south of the Capitol was lined with narrow brick and wood-frame rowhouses. A narrow bridge between D and E streets crossed a small stream. Although L'Enfant envisioned that the avenue would meet the canal at its mouth, as it was built the canal crossed under New Jersey Avenue just south of Garfield Park.

After the Civil War, development accelerated rapidly throughout the city and along New Jersey Avenue. In the northwest quadrant, New Jersey Avenue became the unofficial eastern boundary of the region where great strides were undertaken toward urban improvement during the District's short-lived territorial government. Although the government dissolved in debt and scandal in 1874, the legacy of improvements continued, and by 1881, New Jersey Avenue was paved with wood from O to D Street, and from D Street to the Capitol Grounds with asphalt, and with granite blocks from the Capitol south to the Navy Yard.

³ Goode, 164.

⁴ Varnum, 38.

⁵ Annual Report . . ., 1856, 856.

Also during the 1870s, the District developed the "parking" system still in place today. According to this system, the District paved a roadway within the large right-of-way, planted grass and trees and laid sidewalks in the strips flanking the roadway, allowing abutting property owners to use the remainder of the right-of-way as their front yards. In accordance with the Parking Commission's practice of lining each street with a single species of tree, the "parked" strips along New Jersey Avenue were planted with elms in the 1880s. In 1911, after the trees had reached full maturity, the avenue was described as "one of the most imposing streets in Washington," in a book entitled Shade Trees in Towns and Cities.⁶

As the avenue developed, the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, charged with maintaining the parcels of federal land in the city began improving the triangular parks along the avenue. By 1887, Reservation Nos. 193 and 194 at I Street were enclosed with post-and-chain fences and planted with grass, trees, and shrubs. In Reservation No. 194 walks and flower beds were laid out. Reservation Nos. 195 and 196 were improved toward the turn-of-the-century. By 1902, Reservation No. 195 had a watchman's lodge, gravel walk, and post-and-chain fence. By this time, almost the entire length of the avenue was lined with modest brick and frame rowhouses. L'Enfant's intention that New Jersey Avenue should extend beyond the city boundary was permanently thwarted when developers purchased the large tract of land north of Florida Avenue and subdivided it into a suburban neighborhood called LeDroit Park. To emphasize the separateness of the neighborhood from the city, the streets were laid out on a scheme purposefully in contrast to L'Enfant's. As this area developed, the streetcar line that had only traversed between C and D streets on New Jersey Avenue, was extended from C Street to Florida Avenue by the 1920s. The railroad station at C Street was demolished in 1907 to be replaced by Union Station. Increased traffic in the vicinity necessitated widening New Jersey Avenue in several blocks near the station thereby diminishing Reservation Nos. 193 and 194.

The twentieth century changes made to the southern portion of the avenue were wrought not by private developers, but by the U.S. government. In 1903, the U.S. Navy received authorization to extend the Navy Yard westward, to encompass the southernmost blocks of New Jersey Avenue thereby making M Street its southern terminus. In 1905, the U.S. Capitol took over the portion of Garfield Park lying west of the avenue to erect a power plant.

Both Law's house, then known as the Varnum Hotel, as well as the imposing granite mansion built by Civil War Gen. Benjamin F. Butler in 1874, were razed in 1929 to make room for the immense Longworth House Office Building. North of the Capitol, the blocks between D and K streets saw development in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s with office buildings and hotels. The 1960s also brought great change to the southern segment of the avenue when the elevated Southeast/Southwest Freeway bridged over the historic vista at G Street, SE.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: 160' from building line to building line.

⁶ Solotaroff, 80.

2. Length within city limits: The approximately 2.8-mile avenue, is entirely within the historic city limits.

B. Elements within the right-of-way:

1. Roadway: Approximately 50' wide, except in the several blocks north of the Capitol where it is wider, New Jersey Avenue supports two-way traffic with curb parking. The block immediately north of the Capitol is reserved for angle parking. The segment of the avenue between M Street and New York Avenue supports one-way southbound traffic. Medians have been added to control the dense traffic between G and K streets, NW.
2. Sidewalks and street trees: Scattered mature elms remain in cutouts in the concrete paver sidewalks flanking the roadway almost the entire length of the avenue. In the blocks nearest the Capitol, Washington Globe lamp standards have also been installed in the beside the roadway. The rest of the avenue is illuminated by highway lamps.
3. Large reservations: The avenue forms the west boundary of Garfield Park between E Street and Virginia Avenue, SE.
4. Smaller reservations: The following list describes each reservation identified along this avenue by 1894, the date it was first recognized as federal property, the date of transfer, the date of first improvement, if known, and its appearance historically and as of summer 1990.
 - a. Reservation No. 190: East of the avenue, west of Fourth Street, north of P Street, NW. Although identified in 1884, this reservation was still unimproved in 1900. It was reduced to current 2,281 square feet when a road was cut through in 1947. Surrounded by brick perimeter sidewalks and sodded strips with street trees, this grassy, two-part reservation has quarter-round coping and a tulip trash can.
 - b. Reservation No. 191: West of the avenue, east of Fourth Street, south of O Street, NW (4,561 square feet). Originally a triangle abutting City Square No. 522, the street on the west has been removed and converted to a park as part of the Shaw redevelopment project. Concrete perimeter sidewalks with sodding and trees remain on the east side of this sodded open space.
 - c. Reservation No. 192: East of the avenue, west of Third Street, north of N Street, NW. Although this reservation was identified in 1884, it was still unimproved by 1900. Although it never appears to have been formally transferred, it is now within a school yard.
 - d. Reservation No. 193: West of the avenue, east of Second Street, north of I Street, NW. Originally identified in 1884, this freestanding triangle was first improved in 1886 when it was enclosed with a post-and-chain fence, planted with evergreen and deciduous trees, and irrigated. Now this 4,780- square-foot

reservation is surrounded by brick and concrete perimeter sidewalks flanked by sodded strips with street trees. It is symmetrically planted with three shade trees and surrounded with a holly hedge.

- e. Reservation No. 194: West of the avenue, east of Second Street, south of I Street, NW. Originally identified in 1884, this trapezoid abutting City Square No. N563 was first improved in 1887 when it was enclosed with a post-and-chain fence, laid out with walks and flowerbeds, and planted with deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs. It is now surrounded by quarter-round coping, and brick and concrete perimeter sidewalks flanked by sodded strips. Four metal-frame wood-slat benches face north onto an asphalt path running through the south side of the park. Behind the row of benches is an evergreen hedge. Ornamental trees are planted in the south corners, and an ornamental iron fence dating from the 1920-30s surrounds the park.
 - f. Reservation No. 195: East of the avenue, west of First Street, north of G Street, NW. Originally identified in 1884, this trapezoid was graded, sown with grass, and partly planted by 1894. Although transferred to the Government Printing Office in 1986, this approximately 10,000-square-foot reservation is a well-maintained park. It has been divided into two parts, a triangle and trapezoid, by a through street. Four benches face south onto an area in the northern section paved with asphalt. A sodded area is planted in the center of this section. The south, triangular segment is sodded and surrounded with concrete coping. A concrete sidewalk runs along New Jersey Avenue. First Street, on its east has been closed to through traffic and is used for parking.
 - g. Reservation No. 196: South of the avenue, east of First Street, south of F Street, NW. Officially identified in 1884, this reservation abutting City Square No. 627 was 4,903 square feet. By 1894, it was graded and planted with grass and shrubs. Now the 3,815-square-foot sodded trapezoid is surrounded by concrete quarter-round coping and concrete perimeter sidewalks flanked by sodded strips with street trees. Two asphalt paths run from east to west through the park, and two brick paths running north/south connect them and create a square bed that is planted with ivy and one large shade tree. Concrete-support, wood-slat benches face the ivy bed from the north and south. A chain-link fence runs along the south side of the park and along the south parts of the east and west sides in the vicinity of the ivy bed. North of the ivy bed area is a large sodded trapezoid planted with several shrubs.
- 5. Buildings: The U.S. Capitol is the only building on the axis of the avenue.
 - 6. Front Yards: For the most part, the boundaries of the right of way have been respected along this avenue and where homes are still standing, front yards within the right of way are enclosed with fences and planted.

- C. Framing elements: Large government buildings take over the first two blocks south of the Capitol. Between D and E streets, the avenue has an entirely residential character, most of the houses appearing 100 or more years old. South of E Street the avenue historically crossed through Garfield Park, the portion of the reservation west of the avenue is now used as the heating plant for the Capitol and the section of the park to the east houses a day care center. North of the Capitol, the avenue is framed by large office buildings and hotels to about M Street. From M Street north to Florida Avenue, the roadway is flanked by modest two- and three-story townhouses, many dating to the turn-of-the-century.
- D. Vistas: The avenue crosses over the railroad tracks along Virginia Avenue, and less than a block to the south of the tracks, the Southwest/Southeast Freeway crosses over the avenue. Except for this one intrusion, the avenue offers almost a continuous view of the Capitol dome.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Board of Commissioners. "City of Washington Statistical Map Showing the Different Types of Street Trees." 1880.

Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

Hopkins, G. "Map of the District of Columbia from Official Records and Actual Surveys." 1887.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Plan of the City of Washington, District of Columbia, showing the Public Reservations." Prepared by Orville E. Babcock. 1871.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

Toner, Joseph M. "Sketch of Washington in Embryo." 1874.

B. Early Views:

ca. 1875: View of New Jersey Avenue at C Street, NW, looking south to the Capitol (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division).

ca. 1927: Survey photographs of each reservation (photographs of reservations under NPS jurisdiction are in the NPS Reservation Files; those of

reservations transferred from NPS to the District of Columbia are in the HSW Reservations Collection).

C. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. 1867-1933.

Caemmerer, H.P. Washington, The National Capital. Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1932.

Goode, James M. Capital Losses: A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.

Eberlein, Harold Donaldson, and Cortlandt Van Dyke Hubbard. Historic Houses of Georgetown and Washington City. Richmond, Dietz Press, Inc. 1958.

Record Group 42, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA RG42).

Reservation Files. National Capital Region Headquarters, Office of Land Use.

Reservations Collection. Historical Society of Washington.

Solotaroff, William. Shade Trees in Towns and Cities. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1911.

Varnum, Joseph B. The Seat of Government of the United States. New York: Press of Hunt's Merchant's Magazine, 1848.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold
Project Historian
National Park Service
1993

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.